

Embracing Beauty in a World of Affliction

Natalie Carnes

Baylor University

THEY ARE LOCKED IN OPPOSITION, the two fictional sisters. Sisters in blood, Elizabeth Costello calls them, but not in spirit. Elizabeth is an aging Australian novelist imagined by J. M. Coetzee. In his story “The Humanities in Africa,” she has traveled to Zululand to celebrate her sister Blanche, now Sister Bridget, who is receiving an honorary degree from a university there. Once a classicist, Sister Bridget long ago abandoned the academic path to pursue a religious vocation with the Sisters of the Marian Order. Now she administers their hospital, Blessed Mary on the Hill.

The opposition between the sisters pivots on humanism and beauty. Sister Bridget’s support for making and venerating crucifixes repulses Elizabeth, who describes the tradition as “mean,” “backwards,” “squalid,” and “stagnant.” Elizabeth asks: What does Blanche have against beauty that she would import into Zululand this “*Gothic* obsession” with ugliness and death?¹ Sister Bridget’s fetishization (as it seems to Elizabeth) of the crucifix elevates suffering and mortality over and above the best humanity is capable of being. Why not instead turn to the Greeks, whose art presents humanity in its prime of life: healthful, vigorous, and strong (130)? For her part, Sister Bridget accuses Elizabeth of cherishing a conception of beauty rejected by the ordinary people of Zululand and around the world. Ordinary people have freely chosen the crucifix over Greek statues, Sister Bridget claims, because it speaks to their condition in a way the ideals of Greek beauty do not (140–41).

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¹ J. M. Coetzee, “Lesson 5: The Humanities in Africa,” in *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 139–40. Hereafter, page numbers will be given in parentheses in the text.



Sister Bridget's argument extends the critique of the humanities she began in her speech accepting her honorary degree, but it is not that speech that occasions this particular argument with her sister. It is Elizabeth's encounter with Joseph, a craftsman salaried by Sister Bridget's hospital, who has spent his life carving versions of the same crucifix, over and over again. Elizabeth's rejection of this aesthetic ideal is both intellectual and visceral. After the argument, under Joseph's large crucifix hanging in the chapel of Sister Bridget's hospital, Elizabeth faints. The next day the sisters part ways, perhaps for the final time, with Sister Bridget continuing to argue her point even as she says farewell. And so the two sisters are locked in opposition—or, as Elizabeth describes it to herself—they are locked, unto death, in an embrace. "Sisters," she thinks, "never let go of each other" (144).

HOW BEAUTY RELATES TO AFFLICTION: TWO SISTERLY ANXIETIES

In Elizabeth Costello's words, the sisters debate beauty versus ugliness, but we might as justly narrate their competing aesthetic ideals as two divergent conceptions of beauty. The criticisms that each sister voices, at least, have been leveled against—and contributed to the marginalization of—beauty in modernity. The sisters articulate two different strains of anxiety about beauty. The first, more dominant strain worries that beauty is inescapably bourgeois. Expressing something like Sister Bridget's concern with an elitist beauty assimilated to strength and power, Simone Weil voices a strong version of this anxiety by claiming, "The horror of poverty is essentially a horror of ugliness."² Beauty, according to this anxiety, conduces to upper-class disdain for and withdrawal from the lower classes.³

For this first anxiety, beauty contributes to the wealthy's aversion to the poor because they or their existence is found ugly, and it then entrenches this aversion further by deeming what the poor find beautiful to be ugly (or kitsch). The lower classes simply do not have good taste; they find the wrong things beautiful, which in turn confirms their fitness for the lower classes. Beauty's association with the bourgeois is then reinforced by its intimacy with the market, as "beauty" names a section in drugstores and women's magazines—a set of products and rituals that promise social status. The distance between high and low social status is marked by beauty, as those who do not suffer from poverty avoid the poor because they are not beautiful and then the former use their standards of beauty to moralize and secure that aversion. And the "horror of poverty" might more broadly signify the horror of affliction. As the love of beauty distances a person from those who are poor, so it could mean distancing oneself from the afflicted. Elizabeth exhibits something like this aversion in her reluctance to tour Sister Bridget's hospital, fearing to confront the tableaux of affliction there, and in her disdain for the smallness and quality of Joseph's artistic world.

The second strain of anxiety speaks to Sister Bridget's aesthetic ideal, which one may, following Elizabeth Costello, call ugliness, just as one may, like others, call it a different conception of beauty or a divergent aesthetic ideal. This second strain is a worry that this aesthetic ideal (this conception of beauty) sentimentalizes, even sacralizes, poverty. This worry has been aired, for example, with respect to Sebastião Salgado's beautiful photographs of those suffering from famine, disease, and hard labor. The reactions to Salgado's photographs emblemize a certain

² Simone Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Joseph Marie Perrin (New York: Perennial, 2000), 106.

³ Pierre Bourdieu famously makes this critique in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

modern discomfort with beauty. Critics charge Salgado with “aestheticizing” tragedy and so anesthetizing the viewer to the situation depicted rather than galvanizing her to action.⁴ For making such beautiful photographs, Salgado is accused of conferring a kind of holiness on his suffering subjects, thus drawing on a long Christian tradition of conflating human suffering with God’s will and so suggesting such suffering need not be cured.⁵

As the language of holiness and sacralization suggests, this is a worry about the way beauty (aesthetics) merges with religious idioms, especially those of Christianity. The critique resonates, for example, with Christopher Hitchens’s evisceration of Mother Teresa for basking in the holiness of the dying rather than seeking medical treatment for them,⁶ and it is sounded in Elizabeth’s disgust with the valorization of the crucifixional tradition she finds in Sister Bridget and her order. The concern here is that perceiving beauty in poverty is a way of perceiving the poor as holy and thus leaving them in their affliction so that we who are not so afflicted can reap the benefits of their beautiful holiness. Afflicted individuals are adulated qua their status as afflicted, and so the institution of poverty continues. This aesthetic ideal, as the critique goes, denies life and human flourishing, especially the flourishing of those who suffer. Elizabeth seems motivated by something similar to this worry when she confronts Sister Bridget with failing to expand the poor carver Joseph’s world beyond the crucifix, thus denying him a fuller life and encouraging him to overproduce crucifixes until he is ridden with arthritis and unable to work any longer (136–38). The suppression of the possibility of a fuller life for this poor man out of veneration for the crucifix could serve as a metaphor for this critique of beauty. The poor and afflicted are sacrificed to their station, like kindling to a fire, so that the privileged may enjoy their beauty, warming themselves in the glow of their holiness.

These two different aesthetic ideals, according to their critics, each chain the afflicted to their affliction. For both, poverty and suffering become untouchable, either because affliction is horrifying (the critique of Elizabeth’s aesthetic ideal) or because it is sacred (the critique of Sister Bridget’s aesthetic ideal). Whichever aesthetic—we might call it a vision of beauty—captivates you, you are doomed to a callous, if not parasitic, relationship to the afflicted.

But in Coetzee’s narrative, the opposition between the two aesthetic ideals dissolves over the course of the story. As the opposition dissolves, it reveals not the distance between beauty and affliction, but their nearness. The narrative, that is, belies the aesthetic positions of the sisters. The sisters name paintings exemplary of their positions, and these paintings haunt the story, exposing the inadequacy of the aesthetic positions they are supposed to represent. The images and their ongoing, complicated presence in the narrative suggest a deeper vision of beauty that reconciles Elizabeth’s and Sister Bridget’s supposedly competitive aesthetic commitments.

The haunting images are paintings of Christ, whose presence in the story as image echoes the theological claim that Christ is the Image of the Invisible God. I draw on theological strands associated with fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa to argue that Christ is the Image

⁴ Ingrid Sischy, “Photography: Good Intentions,” *New Yorker*, September 9, 1991, 92.

⁵ *Ibid.* Susan Sontag launches a similar critique in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 78–79.

⁶ One way we might understand the debate around Salgado is as an aesthetic expression of Hitchens’s critique of Mother Teresa. In fact, one line from Mother Teresa that Hitchens quotes with disgust explicitly seems to conflate poverty and beauty. She says, in an interview, “I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the Passion of Christ.” Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (New York: Verso, 1995), 11.

who dissolves the dispute between the two competing aesthetics by identifying a deeper beauty. It turns out that the beauty that emerges from Coetzee's narrative not only speaks to modern concerns about beauty but also finds deep continuities in certain Christian traditions, despite how often such traditions have also betrayed it.

I begin by turning to the images that haunt the short story. They help stage beauty's relationship to affliction by insisting on a God who comes by way of not-God, the divine by what is dissimilar to divinity. These images of Christ highlight a conceptual symmetry between images and Christ that enables the church to proclaim that Christ is both the most beautiful of humans and utterly lacking in beauty. It is the first step in tracing beauty's particular nearness to affliction.

IMAGE AND NEGATION: CORREGGIO, GRÜNEWALD, AND CHRIST

The original version of "The Humanities in Africa" does not feature images so prominently as the final one. It ends with the sisters' parting embrace, as Sister Bridget tells Elizabeth that she went for the wrong Greeks: the high-flown, rational Apollo instead of the earthy, suffering Orpheus (145). But in the lengthened story that appears in Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, Elizabeth reflects that it is not so much the Greeks that emblemize her position as the Greek-inspired Renaissance, particularly Antonio da Correggio's paintings of the nursing Mary (149). For her part, Sister Bridget names Hans Holbein's dead, prone Christ and Matthias Grünewald's suffering, dying Christ as extreme representatives of her position (139). And so the painters are lined up, in support of the two aesthetics: Correggio versus Grünewald.⁷

It is not quite fair to say that these painters represent Sister Bridget's understanding of the argument. She never hears Elizabeth's attempt to claim Correggio, and when she names the opposition herself, she uses different terms: Apollo against Orpheus, Greek statues against the crucifix, Hellenism against Christianity. As the narrative progresses, Elizabeth's position evolves beyond the parting embrace into a form she never communicates to Sister Bridget. It is a month later, composing a letter she will never send to her sister, that she puts forward *Correggio's Madonna Nursing* as an alternative to the Gothic ugliness represented in *Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece*. Sister Bridget's perspective is unavailable to us readers. She never responds to the letter because Elizabeth never sends it. And even when Sister Bridget appears earlier in the short story, we are granted little access to her understanding of the argument. Her eyes, when they are mentioned, are blocked by reflecting light; her "wintry" and "steely" smiles discourage intrusion into her person (133, 137). We are walled off from her mind. (Does Coetzee believe commitments such as hers are difficult for moderns to access?)

The images, like the sisters, are well matched. Both paintings purport to represent Christ. They are painted around the same time—1520 for Correggio's *Madonna Nursing* and 1512–16 for Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*. They are poised on the edge of the Reformation overtaking Europe, though *Madonna Nursing* is made by the Catholic Correggio, and Sister Bridget claims that the German Grünewald is an artist of the Reformation (13).⁸ And so the images seem to rep-

⁷ It is crucifix more than corpse that characterizes Sister Bridget's position, as Elizabeth characterizes it, so I will focus on Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*.

⁸ The *Isenheim Altarpiece* was completed a year before Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses, but Sister Bridget is not alone in her assessment of the piece as imbued with Reformation spirit. It is not clear exactly why Sister Bridget brings up Grünewald and Holbein, or how she sees her relationship to them—whether it is that the aesthetic tradition she defends is larger than medieval Catholicism or if the most extreme version of her position is Protestant rather than Catholic.

resent divergent aesthetics, antagonistic ways of interpreting the divine-made-human, on the eve of the church's breaking: the life-affirming image of mother and child versus the agonizing image of the death of the man. Yet there is something similar in how each image presents Christ. Each image offers Christ to the viewer by negating itself, by insisting on its own inadequacy as a presentation of Christ.

The negation is more obvious in the case of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*—a strikingly gruesome scene of crucifixion. Christ's head is bowed; his mouth hangs open. Blood flows from his side and feet, which are pierced with a large stake. His fingers are splayed open, tensed, it seems, in a pain response that contrasts with his slackened head and mouth. The thorns in this image do not just encircle Christ's scalp; they cover it, like hair. This is a picture of dying, and Christ's body signifies, in many details, the coming death. Reformation historian Joseph Leo Koerner describes the altarpiece as cultivating "a mental picture of the ruination of a body" that results in "the recognition that what we end up seeing—in our minds, in our hearts, in the painting before us—is also everything Christ is *not*."⁹ By also picturing what Christ is not, Christ is presented to the viewer. The "is *not*," in Koerner's words, "makes God's invisibility *also* visible."¹⁰ Koerner describes this as both saving and rejecting appearances.¹¹

Grünewald's gruesomeness is a way of rendering legible the logic of the Incarnation, in which the God for whom no image is adequate becomes an Image. The *Isenheim Altarpiece* dramatizes the God who comes in the void of power, of meaning, of life.¹² God in Christ comes, not in a theophany that obliterates mortality, but in a presence-in-absence, a God displayed as mortal. Grünewald's gruesomeness underscores that God in Christ comes by what is dissimilar to God, without eradicating that dissimilarity or ceasing to be God.

In two other ways, Grünewald's image stresses the way God in Christ comes by what is dissimilar to God. First is the shape of the corpus; second is the affliction of the flesh. In the altarpiece, Christ's body echoes the shape of the chalice at his feet. His arms stretch into a wide V, and his body dwindles at his legs, crossed at the feet, where a single stake fixes them in place. The blood that drips thickly from his wounds is mirrored in the blood that drips from the cross-carrying lamb and is collected into the chalice below. Christ, the lamb of God, fills the cup because Christ is the cup. The altarpiece proclaims a high Eucharistic theology: that on the altar the bread and wine become what they are not, the body and blood of Christ, and that these elements might extend Christ to the communicants. On the altar, Christ becomes the cup of salvation. In figuring the crucified Christ as a chalice, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* reiterates the movement of God into not-God, a movement that presents God to the ones who are not God. The Eucharist presents God invisibly—it looks like ordinary bread and wine, not divine flesh and blood—and in visibly

⁹ Joseph Leo Koerner, "The Icon as Iconoclasm," in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 196. Koerner expands on this and similar themes in his monograph *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Koerner, "Icon as Iconoclasm," 196.

¹¹ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 124.

¹² Rowan Williams's formulations of a similar paradox in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* have been helpful to me here. He writes, for example, "The cross in particular, and the incarnate life in general, display the distance between God and creation in displaying their union. How is God present in the world? In a death, in weakness, inactivity, negation. . . . It is the 'void'—in worldly terms—of Christ incarnate and crucified that establishes the *difference* of God; it is the emptiness of meaning and power that makes Christ supremely *signum*. He is God's speech *because* he is worldly 'silence.'" Rowan Williams, "Language, Reality, and Desire in Augustine's *De doctrina*," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3, no. 2 (July 1989): 144.

representing this moment of Christ's invisible presence, Grünewald's painting makes invisibility central to its rendering God visible. In Koerner's language, it saves appearances by rejecting them.

The altarpiece dramatizes this logic a third time in Grünewald's rendering of Christ's skin. It is covered with plague-like sores and wounds from skin disease. Just so did the afflicted gazing at the altarpiece find a Christ who shared their suffering: the altarpiece was originally installed in the chapel of a monastery noted for its care of plague sufferers. It is Christ for a hospice chapel, a Christ visually identified with the patients beholding him. But this visual identification with those suffering underscores Christ's presence to the suffering, which is both invisible (they look like ordinary people) and visible (they make Christ visible to the world). Thus, the painting can make God visible by insisting on God's invisibility. Once again, the images *image* by disclaiming the totality of imaging, by both absorbing and redirecting the gaze of the beholder.

God is signified, in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, not in a visual rhetoric of magnificence but in a visual rhetoric of dissimilarity. Rather than imaging God by making the most magnificent being he could paint, Grünewald signifies divine magnificence as beyond all earthly greatness. The image turns Christ's body into a repertoire of signs that the viewer understands as dissimilar from the signified. In one way, the invisibility of God is made visible through its unmistakable difference from dying flesh. The beholder sees God by seeing not-God—by seeing death and ruination—and so seeing a Christ who exceeds the dying humanity that is also his.

Koerner construes what he calls the Gothic aesthetics of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as anticipating Lutheran theology—a theology of the cross in which God is hidden in the act of revelation. But the *Isenheim* dialectic of God revealed in what is far from God can also be found in Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of theological language, which commends metaphors that compare God to what is obviously not like God. In such cases, Thomas points out, we are less likely to forget that our language is simply metaphor.¹³ Thomas is not idiosyncratic here, either. He draws on the sixth-century theologian known as Pseudo-Dionysius, whose thought, together with Augustine's, dominated Western medieval theology. Pseudo-Dionysius writes that the divine is fittingly disclosed through dissimilar symbols, which unsettle attempts to identify God with the creaturely world.¹⁴

In this deep tradition of making God known through exaggerated dissimilarity, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* presents God through an image that telegraphs itself as inadequate to God. The setting of the altarpiece in a magnificent chapel then reinforces the inadequacy of the plague-ridden body as an expression of the fullness of Christ. Surrounded by splendor in service to the God of the altar, the altarpiece does not enthrone ugliness and squalor (as Elizabeth Costello would fear) so much as chasten the claims one could make of the beauty surrounding it. Grünewald's depiction of Christ's body reveals God as beyond representation. It mediates the divine beauty under the sign of what such beauty is not.

Yet, of course, Christ's body is not just a metaphor for the divine. It *is* the perfect representation of God, the only sign in which there is no gap with the signified, the Image who is also the perfect presence of the imaged. That which cannot itself aspire to divine adequacy is assumed into the divine life; humanity is given adequacy as a gift. In Christ, God truly suffers human death; Christ's body and death truly reveal God. The metaphorical dissimilarity espoused by Thomas and Pseudo-Dionysius echo the dissimilarity embedded in the Incarnation itself, in which God becomes what God is not. Grünewald's image saves appearances by rejecting them,

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* 1.1.9 ad 3.

¹⁴ This is the argument of chapter 2 of Pseudo-Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy*.

as dissimilar metaphors save speech by rejecting the metaphysical pretensions of speech about God, and as Christ saves humanity by rejecting the limits of (sinful, mortal) humanity.

Madonna Nursing takes a different tack, but it also images God through negation. In the tradition of *Maria lactans* so popular in the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries, Mary bares her nursing breast for the Christ-child.¹⁵ Correggio's is a tender, warmly lit scene. It is profoundly human—until the viewer follows the gazes of mother and child down to the small winged cherub. Christ's body is stretched between his human mother and this angelic creature, whose presence reminds the viewer that this chubby little infant also belongs to another realm. The circulation of gazes that directs the viewer's own line of sight to the cherub constructs the painting's hermeneutic: the humanity that the painting makes available to the beholder is not adequate to the Divine One. In directing the viewer to the winged cherub, the painting says to the viewer, "See here, how I am presenting this invisible creature as if available to your eyes on the same plane as humanity? This is how I can give divinity to you, as a version accommodated to your sight." Just so does the image communicate its own partiality. The image has flattened heaven and earth into two dimensions, projecting Christ onto a screen that can return only a partial version of him. Gazing at the cherub, Mary and Christ direct the viewer to that which breaks the otherwise-unbroken realism of the painting. Thus, the painting suggests that there is more that the image does not (or cannot) show. Like the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, *Madonna Nursing* images Christ by presenting Christ as both the image and beyond the image.

These images insist on communicating Christ by what is not-Christ, and in this way they are similar to Christ himself, who presents God by not-God. Christ yields divine life by human life. In his humanity and visibility, Christ can be the one scripture calls the Image of the Invisible God, but this means that his humanity makes God visible by pointing to the God who yet remains in some sense invisible. There is a symmetry here between Christ and images. Christ presents God by not-God, just as the images present Christ by not-Christ.

The conceptual symmetry of God/Christ and Christ/image is historically expressed in the Byzantine image controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries. For both sides of that controversy, the question of the validity of images in Christianity was determined by the question of who Christ is. Were images faithful to the identity of Christ? Or a betrayal of that identity? The triumph of the iconophiles was not just to defend image making and venerating but to make their argument on the offense. To deny an image of Christ, they claimed, is to deny the Incarnation. For the iconophiles, images importantly witness to God Incarnate by attesting to the way God can be *inscribed* without being *circumscribed*.¹⁶ Put differently, this is the capacity of images to communicate what they are not, to communicate a presence that is more than they are. The way the image negates itself in these cases—exemplified in the visual coding of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and *Madonna Nursing*—is to point beyond itself to yield such divine presence.

If Grünewald and Correggio seem like Christ in giving the divine by what is not divine, their context in Coetzee's short story suggests a divergence from Christ. Whereas the two painters are invoked to illustrate the antagonism of competing aesthetic ideals—what Elizabeth Costello frames as beauty and ugliness—Christ somehow encompasses both ideals. At least, the church

¹⁵ There is more on this fascinating history in Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Knopf, 1997); and Margaret Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹⁶ This distinction is one made by Nicephorus (758–828), ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople from 806 to 815, in his *Antirrhetic II*.

has historically predicated both of Christ. The Catholic Church even liturgically declaims this tension as it draws near its highest feast day of the year. It has two different antiphons for Psalm 45, a song of praise to the king understood to be Christ. The usual antiphon, which comes from the psalm itself, reads, “You are the fairest of the children of men, and grace is continually poured upon your lips.” During Holy Week, the antiphon changes to a verse from Isaiah 53, also understood by the church to speak to Christ: “He had neither beauty, nor majesty, nothing to attract our eyes, no grace to make us delight in him.”¹⁷ This paradox of Christ—as the fairest one who has no beauty, the abundantly graced one who lacks grace—is aired by the very liturgy of the Catholic Church as it nears the day of crucifixion. What Costello claims as oppositional are here both attributed to Christ, whom the faithful know as Beauty Itself. Contradiction is turned into paradox—or, better, into mystery.¹⁸ But this is not a barren mystery. It does not suspend reason to halt further inquiry. It is fecund, generative of further thought about beauty and capable of addressing both strains of anxieties about aesthetic ideals. How does it transform antagonism into generation? Coetzee’s images point the way.

IMAGE AND PRESENCE: GRÜNEWALD, CORREGGIO, AND ELIZABETH COSTELLO

The *Isenheim Altarpiece* and *Madonna Nursing* loose presences that haunt “The Humanities in Africa.” These images have a life in the narrative beyond the tidy purposes the sisters claim for them. Such extended narrational life undoes the sisters’ opposition as articulated by Elizabeth. And it is Elizabeth whom the images really haunt. She inhabits them, or they inhabit her.

Rather early in the short story, Elizabeth’s life bears for a short time vestigial resemblance to the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. The traces appear after attending the ceremony for Sister Bridget, as Elizabeth prepares to visit her sister’s hospital. Anticipating the stomach-sickening sight of diseased and dying children, Elizabeth silently protests the trip. “*Let this cup be taken from me!*” (134). She takes the words of Gethsemane as her own, but once at her Golgotha, she finds it less lurid than she had feared. Her cross, it seems, is not such a grisly ordeal after all. There is even a kind of gaiety among the children in the hospital. Elizabeth finds it “relaxed, even happy” (134). She concedes, “It is as Blanche said in her book: with love and care and the right drugs, these innocents can be brought to the very gate of death without fear” (134). Moving from the wards to the chapel, Elizabeth leaves the site of the figural cross that she had anticipated to encounter a literal one. This literal wooden cross presents in image what she had been loath to see in the children: emaciation and suffering. It is Christ as he drinks the cup, even if Christ is not, as in Grünewald’s image, figured *as* a cup. Like the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, the feet of this crucifix seem pierced with something larger than nails, and the thorns are prominent. Like that altarpiece, it, too, is in a chapel attached to a place of care for the suffering and dying.

¹⁷ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) preached on this juxtaposition of verses. “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty,” Message of His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the Communion and Liberation Meeting at Rimini, August 24–30, 2002, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html.

¹⁸ While paradox may suggest two concepts jostling with one another, competing for preeminence, I mean “mystery” to suggest that these two conceptions of beauty do not curtail one another but find their deepest expression through the other. See Henri de Lubac’s *Paradoxe et mystère de l’Église* (Paris: Éditions du CERF, 1967), which describes the church as paradox in the way that it lives from contrasts that elude conceptual synthesis, and as mystery in the way such contrasts are rooted in a reality that points to the ultimate inadequacy of all concepts.

In the chapel, Elizabeth meets Joseph, the carver. Later she expresses her disapproval to Blanche in a conversation that solidifies their opposition. When she encounters Joseph's cross again, it is during Mass. Just below "the crowned head of the tortured Christ," the priest elevates the Host, the faithful shout in joy, and Elizabeth collapses (142). There is a series of overlapping cross images here, from more literal to more figural, as the story unfolds the complex layers of the cross: suffering, gaiety, emaciation, love, torture, care, life affirmation, death. These cross images complicate Elizabeth's characterization of the crucifixional tradition as squalid, backward, and death obsessed, and the significance of this complication is borne out in the haunting of the second image, *Madonna Nursing*.

Elizabeth hits upon this image as she sits down to write a letter she knows she will never send—a letter "about Mother," she writes to Blanche, who would probably have caught a double meaning in the subject that Elizabeth herself misses (145). She describes sitting for a special friend of her mother's, Mr. Phillips, so that he can paint her after he has had a throat operation. When he becomes unable to paint, she bears her breasts to inspire his artistic virility. She reflects on that moment as a scene of possession. "As I sat there I was not myself, or not just myself" (149). She was exuding a blessing that revolved around breasts and breast milk, in imitation of Mary, of Correggio's Mother Mary. She imagines Correggio painting the scene and identifies with both his model and his image of Mary. It is an act of humanity, Elizabeth claims, not available in Zululand because it requires the humanists' "invasion" of the Christian image to make it possible (150). "After the centuries-long Christian night," she concludes, "the humanities give us back our beauty, our human beauty" (151). She intends this as a final word on her dispute with Blanche. These are among the last few sentences she writes down, as she marshals the image as ammunition against Blanche. But the story goes on. Her memory plays for her the second act.

She visits Mr. Phillips again. He is in a hospital this time, withered and dying. When he thanks her for the day he painted her nude, she bares her breasts in an attempt to summon Mary and bless him once more. If the story ended here, Elizabeth muses, it would be decent still, but it goes on, as she strokes his penis and takes it into her mouth. As for the Greeks, with their ageless gods Elizabeth now describes as "inhuman," they have no proper word for a sight so "grotesque" (154). She finds that the right word is *caritas*, a distinctively Christian term. Her life-affirming Marian blessing has led her to the grotesque, which she yet captures by *caritas*.

Performing Grünewald's Christ, Elizabeth finds even in suffering there is gaiety, human flourishing, and the affirmation of life. Performing Correggio's Mary, Elizabeth exudes life and finds herself, not just amid death, but in a grotesque relation to the dying. This grotesque relation is not a departure from the role of Mary but is somehow faithful to it. The lives of these images—of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and *Madonna Nursing*—resist the opposition of what Elizabeth Costello calls beauty versus ugliness and what others might call competing notions of beauty. The two positions end up, somehow, begetting one another. To elucidate this begetting—what it is and why it happens—I turn to an old, possibly hospital-birther and -birthing, line of theology.

CARITAS: THE GOD OF HOSPITALS

The *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Joseph's crucifix, Elizabeth Costello's Marian role—why does God end up in hospitals? It may seem that in identifying with the suffering and afflicted, God abnegates divinity, but I want to suggest, in line with an old theological tradition, that the opposite is the case. The divine presence in the grotesque is not a departure from the divine life but characteristic

of it, and the movement into the grotesque is not antagonistic to beauty but, in fact, the revelation of beauty. As Elizabeth's attempt at fidelity to Marian beauty goes by way of what seems a betrayal of it, so God's faithfulness to God goes by way of intimacy with not-God, and beauty by way of the grotesque. God does not abnegate divinity in identifying with the suffering and afflicted but expresses through such identification the very marker of divinity. In other words, the revelation of Christ under the sign of not-Christ—as in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and *Madonna Nursing*—is not an arbitrary pairing of sign and signified, image and imaged. It speaks to something about who God is in Godself.

In the line of theology I want to recover, God's nearness to affliction is neither accidental nor threatening to divinity. The question of whether God might be compromised by affliction runs through the very heart of Christian history. Particularly in the first few centuries of Christian history, as the faithful debated how to talk about Christ, commitments to God's all-powerfulness, all-goodness, and impassibility seemed to exclude the possibility that God became human. Either Jesus was not really human (the strand of theology that generated Gnostic Christianity in the second and third centuries) or Jesus was not fully divine like the Father (the strands that led to Arianism in the fourth century). It seemed impossible that Christ could be both fully divine and fully human. As the neo-Arians argued, it is not *fitting*—not beautiful, really—that God could become human. It compromises for them God's Godness. "Fittingness" was in fact the crucial term over which one of the fiercest battles of Christology was fought.

Is it surprising that some of the most vocal critics of the Arian fittingness argument were also those who started what is called the first hospital? Basil the Great organized the first poor-hospice—for the dispossessed, starving, and diseased—during a great famine afflicting his land and people.¹⁹ He also helped lead the charge against the Arian cause, and his little brother Gregory of Nyssa assisted him in both efforts. In his *Great Catechetical Oration*, Gregory responded directly to the Arian charge that it was unfitting (unbeautiful) that God would become human. He defends the Incarnation on multiple fronts—justifying it as consonant with God's power, goodness, justice, and wisdom. But he also goes on the offense, using a medical analogy to argue that the Incarnation is not just not *unfitting*. In fact, he claims, it is also supremely fitting. As a doctor tends to those who are sick, so "the one thing that really befits God's nature" is "to come to the aid of those in need."²⁰ Care for the needy—we might call it *caritas*—speaks, for Gregory, to who God most truly is. God's taking on flesh is an expression of love that does not attenuate God's Godness but reveals God's identity as love that goes out toward the other. He makes this argument by displaying the continuity between God's identity as the Incarnate one and God's identity as Creator. Gregory argues that the Incarnation is a *second* union of God with humanity. The first is creation, in which God unites with all creation to hold it in existence, intimate with it at every single moment. As Creator, God is already intimate with all the universe, from the brightest star to the tiniest speck of dirt. God is not polluted by this creation-union. Why should God be compromised by the incarnation-union?

In creation, God goes out to not-God to bring not-God to life. In Incarnation, God goes out to not-God to bring not-God back to life. And this activity in creation and Incarnation echoes

¹⁹ For more of this history, see Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, "An Address on Religious Instruction," in *Christology of the Later Church Fathers*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy, trans. Cyril Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 290, 306.

something of the divine life of God in Godself. God's movement toward not-God echoes each Trinitarian member's movement toward one other—in which the Father donates the Father's own self to the Son, who donates the Son's own self to the Spirit, who donates the Spirit's own self to the Father, and so on. Within the three persons of the Trinity, God lives in a communion of giving and receiving, the going out toward the other person to give of one's self. The Father gives to the not-Father and receives from the not-Father, the Son to and from the not-Son, the Spirit to and from the not-Spirit. Creation and Incarnation are economic refractions of God's inner life of giving and receiving. They are, that is, God's inner life writ into a relation with not-God. We should not be surprised that God is always coming to us by way of what is not God. This movement of deep unity in difference is constitutive of divine life.

The Cross is a further iteration of this deep unity, in which divinity goes out toward not-divinity. It is the divine life, refracted, not just through life with not-God (creation), or just through life with not-God in need (Incarnation). It is divine life refracted through a world of violence and death—the divine gift even unto death. Under the conditions of need and suffering, the divine life seeps into the deepest and darkest cracks of existence. It goes all the way down to where the lack of divinity is most acute, to where deprivation is greatest. In a sinful word, the divine life takes the form of grotesque *caritas*.

The character of God as *caritas* is clarified in one of the most preached-upon texts of the Christian tradition: the radical identification of God with poverty, when Christ declares in Matthew 25 that what is done or not done to the least of these—the hungry, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned—is done or not done unto him. That God is *caritas* means that Christ is especially present in those the world has forgotten and rejected, precisely because they have been forgotten and rejected. So the kind of presence Christ mediates—*caritas*—means that beauty is found in the ravaged, scarred places of the world, even as beauty is not identical with those ravages.²¹ The scars of poverty are themselves ugly, even as precisely their ugliness renders them important sites of beauty, of God's presence in the world. What Christ renders present is that-which-goes-out toward that which lacks that-which-goes-out. This is the love that overflows to poverty and suffering. God ends up in hospitals because God is *caritas*.²²

During the great famine that afflicted his land, Gregory of Nyssa preached on Matthew 25. In those sermons, Gregory explicitly connects *caritas* (or, since he wrote in Greek, *eleos*) with beauty: “For it is beautiful [*kalon*] for the soul to provide mercy [*eleos*] to those who are in need.”²³ Beauty, we might say, is the visibility of the love that goes forth in imitation of the God who is love going forth. There is no tension between the God of *caritas* and the God of beauty, for *caritas* is the visibility of beauty. And this need to which *caritas* responds includes but is not reducible to poverty and its ravages. The rich are also healed in their encounters with the poor. The beauty of

²¹ By this logic, why are the perpetrators, who are also sites of deprivation of divine life, not also identified with Christ? In their perpetration of violence, they refuse the gift of divine life. The afflicted might also be resistant to this gift but not qua their affliction (just as perpetrators might also be the afflicted and so identified with Christ, but not qua their perpetration).

²² Augustine has a characteristically lovely way of describing God's movement of Christ, saying that in Christ, God became human “so that bread itself would be hungry, fullness be thirsty, strength become weak, health would be wounded, life would die[.] All this to feed our hunger, water our drought, comfort our infirmity, extinguish our iniquity, and kindle our charity.” Augustine, “Sermon 207: On the Beginning of Lent,” in *Essential Sermons*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New Press, 2007), 259.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, “‘On Love of the Poor’ 2: ‘On the Saying, ‘Whoever Has Done It to One of the Least of These Has Done It to Me’” [*In illud: Quatenus uni ex fecistis mihi fecistis*], in Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 206.

caritas is the meeting with the grotesque—as Gregory’s sermon suggests, there is beauty where the sickness of greed meets the sickness of starvation for mutual healing.

THE EMBRACE OF BEAUTY: WHAT BEAUTY EMBRACES AND HOW BEAUTY IS EMBRACED

This vision of divine beauty wrapped in the grotesque is previewed in the farewell that originally ends “The Humanities of Africa,” as the sisters say good-bye. Likely there is a ritual parting embrace of the sisters—a light yielding to one another’s bodies and to each’s claim as sister—but Elizabeth does not narrate it. She narrates, instead, Blanche’s parting argument as an embrace. “Sisters never let go of each other. . . . Locked to the end in Blanche’s embrace” (144). In their verbal grappling, the two sisters attempt to overcome the distance between them, to reject this distance as determinative, and in this way their verbal grappling is a kind of embrace. Elizabeth and Blanche’s verbal embrace is a refusal to let go of the one whose similarity and difference are named by “sister.” Yet it seems they fail, finally, to overcome the distance. The story ends in Elizabeth’s lament of the “bar” between them (155). But in this moment of parting, they cling to one another, the antihumanist and the humanist, the religious and the secular, the one who hopes to be like Christ and the one who does not. It is an embrace “unto death” that echoes, however faintly and distortedly, Mary’s embrace of the Christ-child and Christ’s cross-shaped embrace of the world (144). Inasmuch as the sisters are identified in the moment of their embracing with their respective aesthetic positions, the sisters’ farewell anticipates the narrative’s later explorations of a beauty intimate with ugliness. It images the beauty that finds itself by embracing the grotesque.

Both paintings that the sisters name—the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and *Madonna Nursing*—dramatize this beauty in the divine movement into the not-divine. Both render God as giving Godself in *caritas*. In Correggio’s *Madonna Nursing*, Mary embraces the Christ-babe to nurse unto life the Creator of all life, who has chosen to become a helpless and needy babe. The life-giving Mary embraces the dependent babe, and as the dependent babe, the God without needs embraces the creature ridden with them. Then in Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, God, as the Collect goes, “stretche[s] out your arms of love on the hard wood of the Cross, that everyone might come within reach of your saving embrace.”²⁴ As the crucified Christ, the divine life-giver fills even the void of torturous death with divine life by embracing creaturehood unto the absence of life. These are embraces of *caritas*.

The beauty of these embraces comes to us as an image of Beauty itself, which is to say, it comes under the sign of negation. Because beauty is distinct from the mode of its arriving, the beauty the afflicted mediate is not the beauty of affliction. Poverty and suffering can be important sites of beauty—even as they are themselves not beautiful—because they mediate the beauty of the God who is *caritas*. In a world of violence and death, the going-forth beauty of the God who is *caritas* envelops itself in the grotesque. The fairest of the children of men does not draw us with beauty but becomes present to those who are in need—the afflicted, the hungry, the naked, the unsheltered, the imprisoned, the strangers. To receive *this* beauty—the beauty that the fairest one yields in the afflicted—is in turn to yield to it, joining in its movement through acts of *caritas*. As the visibility of *caritas*, beauty becomes most fully itself in the movement toward that which

²⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, according to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 101, <http://www.bcponline.org/DailyOffice/mp2.html>.

is not itself. This is a beauty that refuses the sundering of Elizabeth Costello's life-exuding glory from Sister Bridget's suffering and dying divinity. It is, rather, a beauty that moves continually from glory to suffering, that is found in their embrace.

WHAT ABOUT SALGADO? A CASE OF BEAUTY AND SUFFERING

I have attempted to identify a nearness of beauty and affliction that does not collapse affliction into a form of beauty. But what does this mean for how we perceive the suffering? Or to put the question in terms of the case that emblemizes the modern criticism about beauty aestheticizing tragedy, where does this leave Salgado's photographs? The question is important because it points to an unresolved anxiety about beauty. Even if, conceptually, I have insisted on beauty's nearness yet distinction from affliction, practically, have I collapsed them? Does this version of beauty yet distance the privileged and the afflicted? A variation of this question even has deep Christian roots. Augustine worried about the way theater created a spectacle of tragedy and so encouraged theatergoers to take pleasure in the suffering of others. Gregory of Nyssa worried about the famine-carved bodies of his own time, and the way they were reduced to making spectacles of their affliction, turning their bodies into sources of entertainment so that they might earn some bread. When we look at the afflicted to find divine beauty, do we simply turn them into spectacles? Can beauty be near affliction without chaining the afflicted to their lot? Why does Salgado rankle?

Salgado's photographs are similar to these sixteenth-century paintings because the way they capture light communicates a grace that pours through cracks and shards into the brokenness of life. But Correggio's and Grünewald's paintings show God's giving in such a way that it models and invites humanity's response: God pouring Godself out in the form of an infant, so that Mary tends to the needy God-child; God going forth in the divine life unto death, even death on a cross, as the faithful few wait to tend God's dead body. There is no such modeling of human response to suffering in Salgado's photographs. Perhaps anxiety attends Salgado's photographs because the subjects do not seem to return this divine embrace of *caritas*, so that the divine light seems simply to deify their station in life and fix the distance between the privileged and the afflicted. Perhaps there is no negation to the illuminating presence of the divine, so that the divine simply glorifies suffering.

Or perhaps the problem is situated elsewhere—not in the world within the images but in the world in which the images live. Our world. Criticizing Salgado, Ingrid Sischy concretizes her concern that Salgado aestheticizes tragedy with a story. At a gallery, a woman sees one of his [photographs of a starving boy](#) and exclaims that it is too sad, that she cannot look, that she will just cry. But, like most of us, she does look, and she does not cry.²⁵ Salgado's beautiful images encourage her to look passively when she should respond actively, with care for the boy. The controversy around Salgado testifies to the way the aesthetic, formed and disciplined by institutions like the gallery and the museum, trains us into disinterested gazing as the response to the spectacle of suffering.

Is the image itself culpable for such spectaclizing? For Gregory of Nyssa, responding to Salgado with a disinterested gaze is ugly—unfitting, he would likely say. The very activity of perceiving the divine beauty of the afflicted is inseparable (even if distinguishable) from acting in mercy toward the afflicted. Both Sischy and the tearless gallery visitor she observes intuit the ugliness of the disinterested gaze. This visitor's failure to cry or to help is striking—in a way the same failures by most or all the other visitors is not—precisely because she voices her intention to cry,

²⁵ Sischy, "Photography," 93.

and the writer then criticizes this encounter between the woman and the photograph as evidence of something repulsive.²⁶ Something has gone awry when we disinterestedly contemplate the aesthetic values of a photograph of suffering people. It is not a fitting response to such a photograph.

What would it mean for Salgado's photographs to haunt the world in such a way that we enter into grotesque and beautiful acts of *caritas*? Can those photographs, like *Madonna Nursing* and the *Isenheim Altarpiece* in Coetzee's story, loose divine presence into the world? The question of sight here is inseparable from the question of movement, of loosing presences. And this is to say, it is inseparable from the question of whether we are willing to loose those presences, to bear them into the world.²⁷

CONCLUSION

The two sisters, Elizabeth and Sister Bridget, defend aesthetic ideals that extend throughout the Christian tradition. The beauty that comes in the glory of strength and the beauty that comes in affliction or weakness vie for preeminence in Christian history, but neither defeats the other. Each is well represented in the artistic, homiletic, and theological traditions of Christianity. Each is, by itself, incomplete. The anxieties that each sister expresses about the other's tradition also run the course of Christian history. These anxieties, though, became particularly fraught in the twentieth century, when new attention began to be given to the politics of aesthetics. People ask whom ideals of beauty exclude and what systems such ideals buttress. Beauty seems, in the new situation, caught in a trap. It is problematic for drawing too near poverty and problematic for staying too far away. But the anxieties about beauty's nearness to and farness from affliction are problematic for beauty to the extent that these two positions are framed only as oppositional and not also as embracing—as, in the words of Elizabeth Costello, “locked in an embrace.” For beauty's embrace of what Elizabeth at one point calls ugliness and at another the grotesque is an aesthetic expression of what is the hallmark of God: *caritas*. Because the divine is love, the divine goes forth to the nondivine: in creation, in Incarnation, in crucifixion. Thus does beauty become most fully itself in its movement toward what seems to threaten it, and thus are we, too, involved in beauty, marring it or carrying it forward in our embrace. A

²⁶ Sischy, of course, does not know the end of this woman's encounter, which might have continued after she left the gallery, with tears, soul-searching, and monetary gifts.

²⁷ In an orally given response when I presented this paper, Thomas Pfau framed the ethical issues that images raise through the concept of *assent*—which seems to me an important and interesting way of teasing out the presence that images bear. He draws out assent as a central theme of both Elizabeth's encounter with Mr. Phillips and the beholder's encounter with Salgado's photographs, saying of the latter: “More importantly, perhaps, these images derive their power from the way they compel the beholder to assent to, and become ethically entangled in, the community of suffering captured in these images. To be sure, there is—both on practical and theological grounds—always hope for human intervention and remediation of such affliction. Yet for that hope and consequent action to take shape, there must be images (not just descriptions or statistics) triggering our assent to the real presence of such suffering.” From a response given January 29, 2016, at the Conference on Beauty and Form, Northwestern University.